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Larimer, Harry Gottlieb

# William Shakespeare

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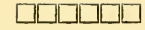
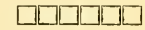


*Shakespeare was an intellectual globe, so vast that we can not grasp it with the puny fingers of our intelligences—clear as crystal, firm as adamant, flawless in surface, solid in content—it yet gave to "airy nothings a local habitation and a name."*



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## William Shakespeare: An Appreciation

*(Written April 22, 1916)*

### GUESSES.

*William Shakespeare was baptized in the parish church of Stratford-on-Avon, England, April 26, 1564, supposed to be the third day after his birth. His father was a tradesman of the town and his mother a descendant of a very ancient family. Shakespeare attended the free school of Stratford where he "learned the little Latin and less Greek" attributed to him by his contemporary, Ben Jonson. At the age of eighteen years he was married to Anne Hathaway, a woman ten years his senior.*

*In 1586 or 1587 he left home for London. In 1589 he was a joint proprietor in the Blackfriars theater. Before 1592 he was well known as an actor and a playwright. In 1593 he published his poem of Venus and Adonis, dedicated to Lord Southampton, who became his lifelong friend and patron. His first known play, "Henry the Sixth," was written in 1593 and from then on in rapid succession followed his thirty-seven dramas, the most precious possessions in literature. Shakespeare gained the favor of Queen Elizabeth and accumulated a fair-sized fortune as a theater owner. The last few years of his life he retired to Stratford, purchasing the largest house in the town. His last published play, "The Tempest," was completed in 1611. For the rest of his days he lived quietly in Stratford, dying on April 23, 1616, supposed to be his fifty-third birthday.*

## FACTS.

Three centuries ago tomorrow, on the fifty-second anniversary of his birth, William Shakespeare died. Of his outgoings and incomings we know next to nothing. Of his thinking and feeling—wondrous facts of brain and heart—we have a fuller knowledge and a sympathy more complete than of any other being save only the Divine Jew whose triumph over death and sin we also commemorate tomorrow.

Shakespeare was a genius; that is to say, he was endowed with the godlike faculty—a creative imagination—a faculty enjoyed by but one in a generation, a century, an aeon, a faculty possessed by him in such perfection that he seems to have experienced and to have understood the mental and emotional life of either sex, of every temperament, of all classes, conditions, ages and races. Because of this superhuman gift, in all that makes truth and character real, palpitating, alive,

### Shakespeare Was a Historian.

Projecting himself into the half-historic days of blind Homer, repathing a portion of the tenth year of the Trojan siege, he is now the green-goose Troilus stammering through the A B C of life and love, betrayed by his misplaced confidence in an unworthy woman, the false Cressida, and now the worldly-wise Ulysses craftily conning the X Y Z of aged experience, concluding with his admonition to self-proud Achilles, "The fool slides o'er the ice that you should break," Shakespeare is a Greek of the Greeks.

From scanty material he fashioned Coriolanus and Volumnia of the older age, the noble Brutus and his nobler wife, Portia, of the over-ripe republic, near-hero Antony and his courtesan Cleopatra, both suited to the gangrenous age of decadence, conspiring with Cassius, cowering with Casca, declaiming with Cicero, reciting the horrors of Titus Andronicus —Shakespeare was a Roman amongst Romans.

Building upon the mere name "Cymbeline," he portrays the two civilizations that flourished on English soil before the Saxon-coming, that of the Latin invaders, and that of the British dwellers. In those splendid lines of Albion's youth, he was the most impassioned of the Celts, the haughtiest of the Latins.

Almost out of vacancy he so recreated Plantagenet England in the persons of King John, gentle Arthur, grandam Elinor, and ambitious Constance that his picture of the days of Magna Carta forms an authentic chapter in English history.

In phrase exactly suited to the character he makes Richard II, last Plantagenet, poetize his crown away to Henry, fourth of that name, and first of the House of Lancaster.

With roll of drum and squeak of fife, he transforms Prince Hal from a madcap reveler into Henry V, the virile soldier of Agincourt, ideal king, and winsome wooer of sweet Kate of France.

Out of the mists of misfortune which enshroud the long reign of do-nothing Henry VI, he constructs from the "Pale ashes of the House of Lancaster" a not unlovely man, dupe of his wicked wife, Margaret.

He breathed upon Richard III, and, with withered arm and crooked back, the ablest and vilest of the English kings limps his forever-detested, never-dying way across the stage of history.

In Henry VIII, he causes Cromwell, Wolsey, the "Defender of the Faith," and virtuous Katherine of Arragon to make straight the avenue through which the modern age was ushered by great Queen Bess, child of Anne Boyelen, the age of which he, a writer of verse and play, was destined to become, and for three centuries to remain, the foremost figure of all this world in the worth of intellectual accomplishment.

The most English of all the English, it only remained that he should draw his own time and class to complete the setting of his historical gallery, and

that he did in Jack Falstaff's comic valentine, "The Merry Wives of Windsor," which transports us back to the taverns, the oaks, and the hedgerows of merry Old England, the home of Raleigh, Drake, Sydney, Burleigh, Kit Marlowe, rare Ben Jonson, and gentle Will Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE IS THE GREAT TEACHER,

A philosopher not alone of the class-room and the study, but a practical philosopher of the laboratory method. His material was human life and character, his reagent that intuitive wisdom which comes we know not whence, and his crucible the glowing universal heart of man.

Thus he understands and makes us to understand the wise Prospero and the beast Caliban in their struggle through "The Tempest" from barbarism to the culture (not kultur) of organized society.

Thus euphuism bears the justice of an indifferent deity to the most inconsequential of his handiwork, "The Two Gentlemen of Verona."

Thus he takes us to the inevitable overthrow of pedantry and learning without wisdom when they come into conflict with sex and nature in "Love's Labor's Lost."

Thus delightful Dogberry's conceit writes himself "down an ass," amidst the consummate wisdom in poesy of that quartet of wit and love—Claudio, Hero, Benedick, and Beatrice—of "Much Ado About Nothing."

Thus he teaches that profligacy and avarice will produce a "Timon of Athens"; that there is a modicum of truth, at least, in the homeopathic dogma that "Like cures like" to be found in "The Taming of the Shrew"; that technicality and, incidentally, justice may sometimes be defeated by straining the "quality of mercy" through the sieve of racial and national hate of "The Merchant of Venice"; and that there is some good in all mortals by conducting us through the fetid purlieu of "Measure for Measure," and

"Pericles," and the sweet atmosphere of "The Winter's Tale."

Thus he paints Helena, tender and hard, ugly yet beautiful, repulsive but exquisitely attractive, surrounded with doubtful circumstance, dulled by the sordid brass of dissipated Bertram and filthy Parolles, for whom no better title could be found than "All's Well That Ends Well."

Thus he draws us to the verge of the infernal fires that heat the crater of wedded male jealousy in the massacre of lion-hearted Othello and his tender victim, Desdemona, and thus, too, he shows how the acid jealousy of a female tongue corrodes the crystal plate of woman's happiness in the drollery of "The Comedy of Errors."

Thus he breathes the calm peace of the philosophic court of the banished duke in those very forests of Arden now made diabolic by the roar of the enginery of hell and hate of humanity about Verdun. Ah, he could not now entitle those haunts "As You Like It," and consecrate their shell-blasted trees to the lines of doting Orlando, or the moralizings of the melancholy Jacques upon the "greasy citizen," the "jewel-headed toad," or "the Seven Ages of Man."

Thus on "Twelfth Night" in Illyria, in another quarter of the theater of the Great War, somewhere between stricken Servia and the purple-waved Adriatic, "concealment like a worm i' the bud" fed upon the "damask cheek" of that glorious girl, Viola, queen of modesty, twin female sovereign with Rosalind of the world's romance and comedy.

Thus he marks Macbeth with the felon's brand, and breaks the mettle of his lady-wife with the deliriums, sleeping and waking, of their unhallowed progress to the throne of Scotland.

Thus he converts the court of British "Lear" into a shambles in which minds are overthrown, and lives outpoured to satiate filial ingratitude and the lust of illicit passion.

Thus stretching his Titan limbs in the grove near Athens, turning from "What fools these mortals be," for recreation's sake, he creates the fairy world of the "Midsummer Night's Dream."

Thus he writes the beautiful drama of "Romeo and Juliet," fresh as the morning air of spring, pure as an Easter lily, refreshing as the dew in the heart of the rose, true as the firmament, the most perfect love story ever penned by mortal mind.

Thus he brings us to face the problem that puzzled the son of "Denmark's buried majesty," that has puzzled all unredeemed sons of men since the morning stars first sang together, and that will continue to puzzle them until "the last syllable of recorded time," the problem of individual life, freedom of action, and moral responsibility for thoughts imagined and deeds done in the body—Hamlet's problem, the "to be or not to be" here, and in that "undiscovered country," where the "rest is silence."

Finally, in all his teaching, Shakespeare inculcates the highest morality, and places no premium upon vice by causing truth to succumb to wrong and falsehood. In the scheme of education of this teacher of his kind, virtue is always womanhood's crown, and purity the guerdon of manhood.

### Shakespeare Is the Greatest of the Poets.

In witchery of words, in form and arrangement of phrases, in completeness and aptitude of figure, in strength of thought and loftiness of flight, he so far outdistances his nearest follower, that he becomes a benign sun to a reflecting planet—a sun which bears but one spot of tinct or shame, the theme of Venus and Adonis.

Great and all pervasive as is this poetic quality throughout the plays, it attains its zenith in the matchless sonnets—at once the wonder and admiration of all poets in all succeeding years. Shakespeare nowhere shows his clarity of vision and sanity of judgment to better advantage than he does in the

sonnets themselves where he again and again assures his lines of an immortality more enduring than brass or marble. In all literature there is nothing more uplifting to the tired, hurt, and friendless soul than is to be found in the beautiful twenty-ninth sonnet:

"When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf Heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee; and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Robert Ingersoll has said in the most complete single figure of speech in our national literature:

"Shakespeare was an *intellectual ocean,* whose waves touched all the shores of thought; within which were all the tides and waves of destiny and will; over which swept all the storms of fate, ambition and revenge; upon which fell the gloom and darkness of despair and death and all the sunlight of content and love, and within which was the inverted sky lit with the eternal stars—an intellectual ocean—towards which all rivers ran, and from which now the isles and continents of thought receive their dew and rain."

To which may be added:

Shakespeare was an *intellectual continent,* whose foundations were laid in the strata of almost perfect knowledge, resting upon igneous rocks fused in the heart-heat of passion and feeling.

In whose surface soils, interspersed with sandy

wastes of ignorance, flourished the flowers, fruits and forests of universal experience.

From whose fields rose the fragrance of blossom, the strain of song-bird, and the gleam of green grass and golden grain.

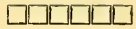
Through whose swamps crawled the saurians of shrinking shame, and coiled the serpents of slinking sin.

Amidst whose jungles roared the lion of bravado; crouched the tiger of cruel hate; barked the wolf of avarice; prowled the jackal of scandal; screamed the hyena of treachery, and purred the panther of deceit.

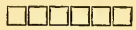
Through whose atmosphere the buzzard of unclean desire hovered its victim; the vulture of revenge stooped its prey; the eagle of ambition soared its lofty flight; the turtle of love cooed to its tender mate, and the lark of aspiration "rose to heaven's gate."

*An intellectual continent,* whose watershed rose from plain, through mound and foot-hill, into towering mountain-ranges, whose bosoms treasured the priceless ores of human sympathy, comfort, and content; whose peaks pushed upward through the empyrean, beyond the snow-line of human suffering, above the clouds of finite endeavor, into the ever-silent spaces of ether where Genius bathed their remotest summits in perpetual sunshine, and condensed the frost of failure and the dew of sorrow into living water which now trickled a rippling rill, now brawled a babbling brook, and now pulsed and swept a majestic river bearing peace, plenty and prosperity to mountain and hill, plain and field, meadow and marsh, as it "slipped on silver sandals to join the shining sea."

Shakespeare *is* an *intellectual world,* upon which memory has set the boundaries of the land, fancy has sketched the limits of the sea, and imagination has peopled both ocean and continent with all the real, wondrous inhabitants thereof.



*Shakespeare was an intellectual planet which, swimming once into the orbit of our ken, a vision splendid, can ne'er from hence depart again.*



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